

Statement of Toni Moore

Events of my involvement in the form of PARADISE MEMORIAL PARK CEMETERY MEMORIAL FUND, a non profit organization created to keep Paradise Cemetery open.

Approximately five years ago, June 1995, I was watching the evening news and saw the cemetery where the majority of my family (the Stewart family) was buried. The story was horrifying. It began with a brief statement something to the effect "Cemetery shut down by the State Cemetery Board" - details to follow. This was the evening news so no real details were available. I remember this being mid-week following Fathers' Day. I immediately got into my car and drove to the cemetery which is approximately 9 miles from my home. When I got to the cemetery news media were all around and the gates to the cemetery were locked. No one had any answers. There was a big sign posted at the top of gates to the cemetery which read "Closed" and a phone number listed to call for information.

I called this number almost nonstop all night with no answer, not even an answering machine. The next morning I went back to the cemetery to find the gates locked again. I went back to my home and started calling the number again and again with no response. This continued most of the day. Finally on the mid-day news there was a bulletin that there would be a community informational meeting at the High School in Santa Fe Springs where the State Cemetery Board would give us some information regarding the closure and status of the cemetery. That evening I went to the meeting that was held in the gym of the high school along with hundreds of other angry and perplexed families and friends of loved ones buried in Paradise. The horror was unbelievable. We were told that a mound of dirt in the rear of the cemetery was full of casket fragments and some remains from what appeared to be older burials at the cemetery. No one knew whose graves were disturbed and at this point no one was talking much to help people find out. The meeting turned into a very angry group of people demanding answers. The meeting was ended with many unanswered questions and broken promises from the State Cemetery Board Chief Executive Officer, Ray Guinta. We were told to go home and watch the news for developments. Since I have/had over 30 relatives buried at this cemetery that was not good enough for me. I continued trying to reach the posted number for the third day with no success. At this point I became enraged. I looked up the governor's number for Los Angeles and called the listed number and asked to speak to then Governor Wilson. A spokesperson asked me what it was regarding. I explained that I had been calling a number listed for the State Cemetery Board of this particular cemetery for the past three days with no answer. Since this was a government office I felt there should at least be an answering machine. I was told by the Governor's office to call the office of Assemblyperson Grace Napolitano office whose district the cemetery was located in. When I called her office I was told to call my representative who was Phil Hawkins. I called Phil Hawkins' office and was told to call Ms. Napolitano's office since the cemetery was in her district. Instead of taking this advice I got into my car and went to Mr. Hawkins office since he was my representative. I demanded to speak to him regarding the run around of the governmental agencies and demanded that he intercede on my behalf letting him know I was a registered voter and a taxpayer. His response to me was "well since the cemetery was not in his district he would see what if anything he could do on my behalf". He did write a letter to Mr. Guinta, the CEO of the Board asking him to assist me, although I did not find this out until several days later. I remained horrified. How could this be happening to my family? I just kept asking myself what was going on. It all seemed like a bad dream and I couldn't wake up. It was going on to the fourth day with no real information. I continued to go to the cemetery and got no answers. The lines at the cemetery were long with people seeking information pertaining to their family decedents. I made out complaints and questionnaires requested by the State Cemetery Board. I demanded to speak to the head of the cemetery board whom I was told was at the cemetery. I waited all day to speak with him. I checked my home telephone for messages hourly with no results, no one had called. Everyday there was stories in the paper with more horrors. DIGGING UP OF GRAVES; RESELLING OF GRAVES; BONE FRAGMENTS BEING FOUND ON THE GROUNDS. MASS BURIAL OF BONE FRAGMENTS BY

BOARD and on and on. Then the final straw for me - CLOSURE OF THE CEMETERY! I started calling my family. I arranged a family meeting. We met on the first Saturday following the breaking news.

Now the family was involved and we organized. We made a list of family members that were buried in Paradise. We listed burial dates to the best of our knowledge. We divided the list into groups with family representatives responsible to get the burial data from the cemetery in order to file police reports. We went to the cemetery to get the records. It took hours. The horror continued. We found different information than what we had. We made out Police reports and filed them with the Norwalk Sheriff Department. We started writing our representatives. We wrote the district attorney. We began calling our representatives and senate representatives both local and federal (PHIL HAWKINS, GRACE NAPOLITANO, WILLARD MURRAY, JUANITA MCDONALD, DIANE FEINSTEIN, THERESA HUGHES, THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS). We got responses from all with no answers or assistance. Then I got a call back. It was a representative from Grace Napolitano's office. I spoke with Danny and he wanted to know if I wanted to be on an advisory committee dealing with the situation at the cemetery. I declined since I had medical problems and let them know that my cousin Linda George whose father was buried at Paradise had agreed to be the family representative. I felt we were on the right track now and we would get some answers. That was not the case.

The cemetery board could not keep the cemetery open due to lack of funding and the board itself was without funding. The CEO of the cemetery board had asked Governor Wilson for emergency funding but it was denied. Until this point we (my family) had no idea a special entity called the State Cemetery Board and the State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers existed. We were shocked to find out that there were governmental agencies that were in place to regulate cemeteries and funeral homes or that we could register complaints with them. We found out that the complaints we registered with the Cemetery Board regarding the cemetery were never even looked at. (No funding we were told)

There was another community information meeting at the Sheriff's facility. Again nothing was resolved and more promises for answers and assistance from the State were made and unfulfilled. A couple of days later the sheriff's department was removing the records from the premises. Again I asked myself, What is going on? We demanded a meeting with the State Cemetery Board or the CEO. We heard nothing. We called the press and met with a reporter from the Long Beach Press Telegram who had done an article on another cemetery with problems in Long Beach. We told him we were afraid they (the state) would just close the cemetery and that would be that. He told us "that can't happen" those were his words, the state could not just close the cemetery. I received a call from the reporter we had spoken with urging me to get to the cemetery. He informed me they were closing the cemetery. On one Wednesday night in mid-July the state cemetery board met at the Cemetery to close it. I rushed to the cemetery. The police were securing the property. I demanded entry into the grounds. I was told only the advisory committee was allowed in. I threatened to run my car through the gates so I was allowed entry. To my surprise the Cemetery Board was there, yes at the cemetery. I burst into the cemetery office and got on the phone to start calling my relatives. Thank God it was Wednesday night so many of them were at Mid-week Bible Study at church. I told them to get to the cemetery immediately because it was being closed. We knew once they closed the grounds it would probably never open again. That night the Stewart family decided to do whatever it took to keep the cemetery open. Lawyers were hired and the cemetery board had to be sued to keep the gates open. Because of the litigation the grounds remained open with funding from the ongoing litigation.

I followed the litigation. I went to all of the status conferences. I argued with the attorneys in the case. I approached the Judge. My family and I made several trips to Sacramento where I testified before whatever committee I could. My family personally kept the cemetery open from mid-August until November 2, 1995 at which point a court receiver was appointed.

Mor bad news for my family. There was another death in the family. The family had to decide on another cemetery. After over 40 almost 50 years of Paradise being the family cemetery we had to look for another cemetery. We knew from our investigative measures that many of our family graves had been disturbed, we had purchased recycled graves and some family members were not in the location we had thought they should be (were left). I have several aging aunts that remain devastated over this. Grave space purchased and unavailable for use.

Because of the litigation we will be able to keep the grounds open. A non-profit was formed to manage and care for the embellishment of the cemetery in February 1999. The non-profit took over the management of the cemetery in April of 1999. I was the Incorporator and President/CEO. Most of my family has since decided they do not wish to visit the cemetery in the future. My oldest Aunt, Lillie Jones really grieves because this is where her mother, two children four sisters, two brothers, a brother-in-law, four grandchildren and many nieces and nephews totaling over 30 (all taken through the gates of Paradise). She has decided never to visit the grounds again. This is the biggest tragedy ever. Our elderly are being victimized daily by the death care industry. Since this tragedy was disclosed and litigation began I have had a sister die, an Aunt and an Uncle. In all cases we had to call the mortuary on the carpet.

What I would recommend to every consumer: CONSUMER BEWARE!!!!

Don't trust when it comes to dollars and cents, READ, READ, READ. I don't really recommend pre-need. Have a person other than family as an advocate. Get a second opinion. Shop around. If you're not able have someone shop on your behalf. If you're not able at the time, have someone available to ask questions for you. Encourage the Mortuary representative to come to your home with the contracts before going to make the arrangements at the Mortuary.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.